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### Monsters, Masons, and Markers: An overview of the graffiti at All Saints Church, Leighton Buzzard

Becky Williams  
*Independent Scholar*

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***Monsters, Masons, and Markers:  
 An overview of the graffiti at All Saints  
 Church, Leighton Buzzard***

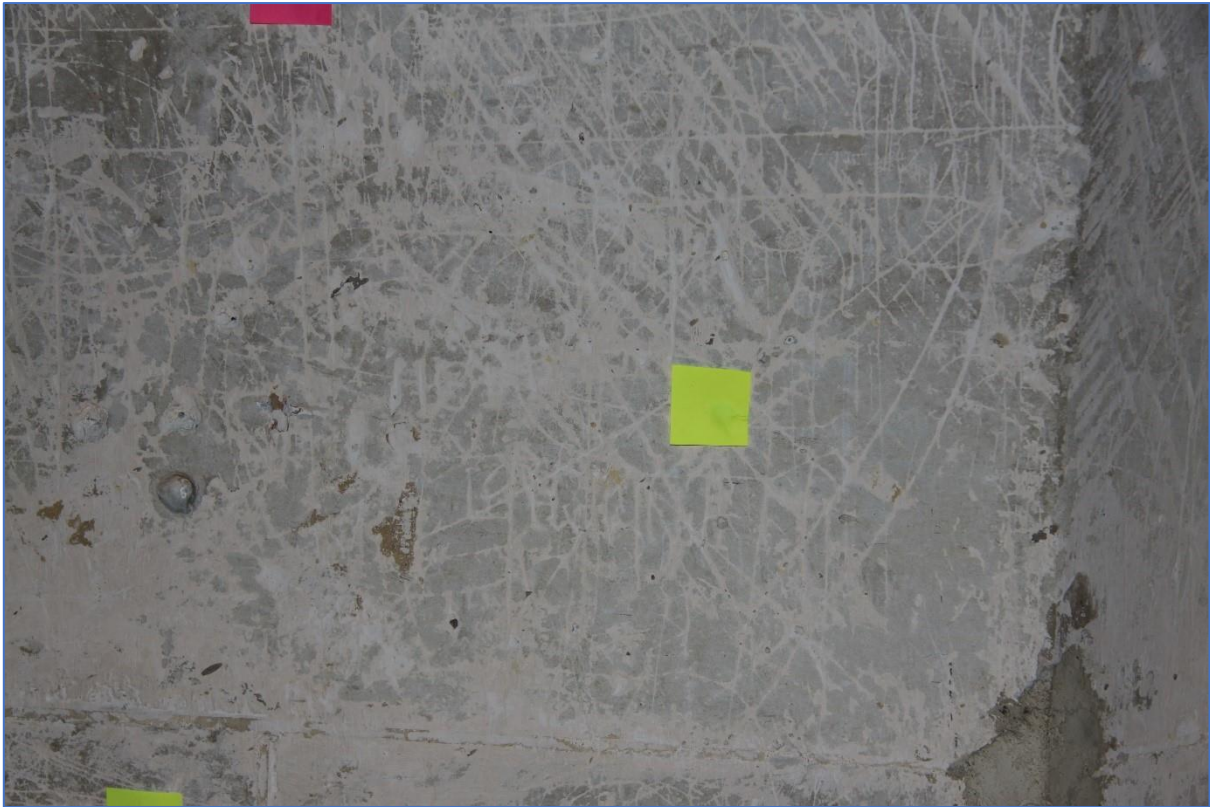
**By Becky Williams, Independent Scholar**

The Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard is home to a large number of graffiti inscriptions which vary widely in terms of their content, form, and execution. Although some of the more-outstanding inscriptions have been noted in the Church visitor's guide, and a few are discussed briefly in Violet Pritchard's 1967 book *English Medieval Graffiti*, they have never been the subject of detailed scrutiny or analysis. Yet the broad scope of extant material at this location, coupled with a relatively good standard of preservation of many examples, makes this an ideal site for exploration. This short paper aims to draw out a small number of graffiti examples for close inspection, offering some initial thoughts about interpretation and function. In doing so, some suggestions about how graffiti might be approached for interpretation and analysis will be demonstrated, and, as a result, some of the possibilities opened up by graffiti study - as well as some of the challenges faced by graffiti researchers - will be highlighted.

An initial survey of the church undertaken in 2012 records some 73 discernible inscriptions,<sup>1</sup> though it is certain that many more have existed, as evidenced by the abundance of "palimpsest" graffiti at the site (**fig. 1**). Graffiti such as these show multiple layers of

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<sup>1</sup> Initial survey carried out by Rebecca Williams, July 2012.



**Figure 1** Palimpsest Graffiti, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.

graffiti carved on top of one another, indicating repeated graffiti activity on the same area of stone over time. It is assumed that original carvings have been covered over at times of decoration or restoration, and that more graffiti was then inscribed on top of fresh paint, leaving their imprint in the stone beneath the newly painted surface. Separating these layers is difficult owing to the varying states of preservation, and because it is difficult to tell one “hand” from the other when the outline is a simple scratch into stonework. Nonetheless, their presence serves to demonstrate that a great deal of graffiti has existed over time on certain areas of the church fabric, a fact which is, in itself, of note. It is also probable that many more inscriptions are now obscured in certain areas by lime-wash,<sup>2</sup> or have simply worn away,

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<sup>2</sup> Some areas of the church were lime-washed in 1961 as the stonework was beginning to crumble, see V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge, 1967) pp. 10-11.

with faint lines in numerous places indicating the presence of graffiti barely visible having suffered damage and wear to the stone surfaces.

While these considerations do highlight some of the limitations in terms of graffiti study, there are some interesting questions raised by these issues – particularly by the presence of complicated, multi-layered palimpsests that are difficult to unravel. Such evidence of repeated graffiti practice in the same place and over a considerable time span lends to ideas about graffiti use, significance, and purpose, and the question of why this activity was repeated in these particular places must be addressed. Of course, the likelihood of evidence that cannot be seen, or at least seen easily, is both frustrating and undeniably problematic, not least as patterns of location and distribution can be a key indicator of possible function and interpretation. The high volume of graffiti in certain areas, as this paper will discuss, may be suggestive of notions of prestige or some perceived benefit from creating these carvings in specific locales. Yet although some graffiti are not easily distinguishable and some surfaces are obscured, there is clear variation in terms of both volume and content at various places in the church where graffiti is visible, at least allowing comparison between these areas even where comparison elsewhere is problematical or indeed impossible. Some of these observations are important; it might be expected, for instance, that nave piers would bear a higher concentration of graffiti than anywhere else because the nave was the most public and accessible area of the church, but this seems not be the case. Graffiti is found here, but in relatively low volume and of a very different style – pentangles and compass-drawn symbols appear most frequently in these areas, but the distinct majority of pictorial graffiti is found in the tower crossing area. Location, place, and distribution must therefore be acknowledged, even if cautiously so.

Aside from assessing patterns of location and distribution, an analysis of pictorial or symbolic content of graffiti is necessary, though similarly limited in terms of discernibility

and preservation. Furthermore, graffiti images are normally (though not exclusively) rudimentary and simplistic in nature, created by unskilled hands, and thus for a less-obvious purpose than a sanctioned and professional piece of religious artwork or sculpture, making its intended function difficult to ascertain - though this paper will also investigate possible exceptions to this “norm.” It will nonetheless be posited that some level of iconographical analysis can proffer interesting thoughts about reception and lay understanding of imagery, particularly when examining the presence of certain symbols and images in graffiti. Furthermore, as already alluded to, some graffiti was clearly executed by a practised hand, and in such cases at least a vague knowledge of authorship lends more easily to considerations about function and purpose.

This short and thus necessarily limited study offers first, a general overview of graffiti at the site, then moves onto closer analysis of a small selection of the extant graffiti in this church, with attention paid to the location and position of the graffiti. It will also provide a brief summary of the wide variety found in form, content, and style, including some initial suggestions concerning interpretation and function. Finally, it will make recommendations about how the graffiti might be approached, and raise possibilities and questions about its meaning and purpose. In doing so, this paper aims to illustrate not only the possible methods and approaches for studying graffiti and its potential as a source for the study of medieval history, but it will also highlight some of the challenges that graffiti researchers face – challenges not only owing to damage and poor preservation or questions of interpretation, but to the sheer wealth and diversity of the source material which makes it difficult to record, categorize, and contextualize. It is hoped that with further serious investigation and efforts to survey and record graffiti, a larger and more-detailed picture will emerge that will help researchers approach these challenges.

The graffiti chosen for close discussion have been selected because a) in spite of suffering inevitable wear and damage over time, they are still clearly visible to the eye; b) they are illustrative of the many different graffiti styles and types that can be found even within just one site, demonstrating the breadth of available source material; and, c) graffiti that is particularly interesting – or, indeed, challenging – in terms of analysis and potential implications, opening up avenues for discussion and interpretation. For ease of reference, the word “graffiti” will be used to term all samples discussed in this paper, though some inscriptions will more closely resemble professional art or design work. The term is nonetheless appropriate if the word “graffiti” can be considered at its root meaning, deriving from the Italian word “graffiare,” meaning “to scratch,” relating to the art form “sgraffito,”<sup>3</sup> where images are scratched into walls of layered, colored plaster.<sup>4</sup> The word “author,” too, will be used to describe the person who created the graffiti: although graffiti consist primarily of symbols and images, any categorization of graffiti as ‘art’ is problematic. Medieval “art” in the church was formalized and commissioned, created by professional artisans, and this is not the case with the majority of surviving examples. Furthermore, images and symbols in graffiti might, in some cases, be used as a substitute for the written word – especially for names and requests – or as a general form of communication or instruction.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> V. Gach, “Graffiti,” *College English* 35/ 3 (Dec., 1973) p. 285. See also the discussion of the term by Matthew Champion elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> An art form popularized in Italy throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the term becoming current in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. See A. Henry and J. Stewart (eds.), *Practical Building Conservation: Mortars, Plasters and Render*, (Ashgate, 2011) p. 99 and J. Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Reaktion, 2001) p. 39. Although the term became current in England during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was not applied to informal inscriptions until the 1850s when it was adopted to describe the ancient graffiti being cataloged at Pompeii.

<sup>5</sup> The idea of image as visual literacy in the Middle Ages has been discussed at great length (e.g.s Camille, Clanchy), and a discussion of this is both beyond the scope and of this paper.

## All Saints Church, Leighton Buzzard

The original church sat within the diocese of Lincoln from the 11<sup>th</sup> century on,<sup>6</sup> when the original church building – possibly made of wood – stood prior to the present construction. The current church building was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with some 15<sup>th</sup> - century modifications, including the perpendicular windows and rood screen.<sup>7</sup> The 13<sup>th</sup> - century structure comprises a cruciform plan with a central tower; a relatively unusual and grandiose structure for the parish church of a small town, more typically seen of large churches or cathedrals.<sup>8</sup> Such an edifice might have been supported by pilgrim donations. A relic of St. Hugh of Lincoln was purportedly housed here. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Dunstable Chronicle* recalls a quarrel between Dunstable Priory and All Saints over the ownership of the tunic, which was resolved with the tunic being divided and shared.<sup>9</sup> It is thought that the south transept housed part of the tunic because of the exceptionally large image niche found on the north wall.

The discernible graffiti at this church is of disparate quality, form, and content, but it can be loosely separated into the following categories:

- heads and faces (15)
- various compass-drawn designs (8)
- window tracery designs (7)

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<sup>6</sup> J. Morris, *Domesday Book: Bedfordshire* (Phillimore & Co. Ltd., 1975) ref 1.1a, 1.1b, 1.1c

<sup>7</sup> *Fasti Ecclesiae 1066-1300*, Vol III, Lincoln (1977); Vicarage of Church and Chapels were ordained 10 Dec 1277. Chancel, tower, spire and nave all date to thirteenth century; chancel windows, clerestory roofs, north and south aisle windows, gargoyles and chancel screen date to the fifteenth century; the transept roofs, nave rood and clerestory all built at the expense of Alice de la Pole who held the manor from 1467 to 1475 - see also Page, William (ed) *A History of the County of Bedford*, III, (London 1912) ) p.402

<sup>8</sup> In 1582, Francis Thynne, Lancaster Herald, marveled at the lack of noble families in the town when considering its size and the size and appearance of the church. See Page (ed), *A History of the County of Bedford*, III, p.402: "In the church of Layton-Busarde in Bedfordshire, a fayr church and a reasonable great towne and yet I found never an arms in the windowe nor any more than one epitaphe."

<sup>9</sup> "Eodem anno orate sunt duae controversiae, et sopitae, inter nos, et Johannem rectorem ecclesiae de Leytona et archidiaconum Oxoniae, super tunica Sancti Hugonis, et minutis decimis de Gledede; ita quod pro bono pacis unam manicam de tunica nobis retinimus, et residuum ei restituimus, et pro minutis decimis promissimus ei duos solidos annuos ad vitam suam." H. R. Luard, (ed.), *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores: Annales Monastici, iii, Annales Prioratus de Dunstaplia*, (A.D 1-1297) (TannerRitchie and the University of St Andrews, 2009) , p. 155.

- Textual inscriptions / lettering (7)
- shields (possibly 6, though some are difficult to make out)
- Human figures (5)
- pentangles (4)
- coats of arms (two shields that appear to comprise one graffito) and heraldic symbols (the fleur-de-lis, at least 2, and the ragged staff x1)
- Creatures (bird, composite beast) (x2)

A handful of graffiti images occur only once: a hand or a foot; a small outline that looks like a gravestone, but is too simplistic and small to identify beyond doubt; a grid, which may have represented musical notation, a chalice with a face drawn on it, and, one image that stands out as more of a bas-relief than a graffito. There are also a number of crosses found around the site: mostly Greek or similar variations as well as one eight-spoked example, and some Pax Christi symbols. There is undoubtedly more graffiti that might be identified at this site, though further work to separate out the layers of palimpsest graffiti is required. Most of the graffiti recorded, forty-four, over half the recorded examples, appear on either the southeast or southwest tower piers, with the remaining spread between the nave piers.

It is significant that most of the graffiti appear to belong to one “category” or another, rather than being singular and unrelated. Although they were created individually and are thus unique to the respective author and are certainly wide-ranging in terms of quality, themes tend to be repeated. A good number of medieval parishioners chose, for instance, to draw a face; numerous crosses can be found, and heraldic symbols and imagery occur on multiple occasions. The repeated appearance of certain pictorial and symbolic themes indicates a familiar, even conventional, activity that had a common, understood purpose.

There are no remnants of painted murals in the church, though it is reasonable to assume that they at one time existed and that they may well have been impressive in appearance and quality when considering the impressive church building and considerable



wealth of the town.<sup>10</sup> Though the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century *Victoria County History* of Bedford's entry for All Saints Church records that there are remains of colored paint that feature one of the graffiti images, no detail was provided and, unfortunately, it is no longer visible. As links between medieval wall paintings and graffiti are apparent at other sites,<sup>11</sup> it is somewhat frustrating that no murals remain in a church with such fine extant graffiti. This is especially so because some of the graffiti probably reflect surrounding decoration or even functioned as



**Figure 2** Bird-like Creature, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.

<sup>10</sup> The market at Leighton was extremely profitable, yielding profits of £10 per year in 1343, whilst the manor was the largest royal manor in Bedfordshire, worth £82 6s 8d by the end of the thirteenth century. See Page, *VCH Bedford*, III, p.402.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the Prior's chapel at Durham Cathedral and Swanington in Norfolk: see P. Graves & L. Rollason, "The Monastery of Durham and the Wider World: Medieval Graffiti in the Prior's Chapel," *Northern History*, vol. L, (September 2013), p. 2; and Champion, M., *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Vhurches* (Ebury Press, 2015).

artwork itself. If the murals had survived, there would have been greater understanding of the audience, reception, purpose, and meaning of both the painting and the graffiti.

## Creatures and Beasts

**Figure 2** is, in some respects, one of the most problematic graffiti examples found at this site, owing to ambiguities in interpretation and a distinct lack of comparable examples. It is one of only two creatures done in graffiti at the site,<sup>12</sup> and though animal graffiti have been recorded elsewhere in England<sup>13</sup> it cannot be said that they comprise an especially high percentage of recorded examples. However, as one of the largest and clearest graffiti at this site, it is worthy of attention and an attempted analysis.

### *Composition and measurements*

The graffito depicts a creature comprised of both bird and serpent-like features, but this is difficult to determine owing to the lack of detail. While the shape of the body, wings and taloned feet might suggest a typical representation of a bird, the head appears serpent-like, so it may portray a fairly crude dragon or an entirely unidentifiable, composite beast found in the margins of manuscript illumination and sculpture, and decoration. Violet Pritchard, in 1967, identified this as a “cockatrice,”<sup>14</sup> but this is implausible. The drawing cannot be said to portray the generally accepted attributes of a cockatrice because it inverts them from the typical representation, with the head of a cockerel and the tail of a serpent.<sup>15</sup> This highlights a challenge of graffiti analysis, as crude, simplistic drawings by unskilled hands are not as easily identifiable when compared to professionally created artwork that

<sup>12</sup> A graffito of a bird resembling a heron can also be found on the same tower pier as the ‘composite creature’, and at roughly the same height, but faces southwards.

<sup>13</sup> Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti*, for example p.84 (dog, Steeple Bumpstead) p.106 (winged bull, St Alban’s Cathedral), 119 (horse, Little Paxton)

<sup>14</sup> Pritchard *English Medieval Graffiti*, p.11.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Kongelige Bibliotek, *Bestiarius - Bestiary of Anne Walsh (Gl. kgl. S. 1633 4°)* (Kongelige Bibliotek - National Library of Denmark) <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast265.htm>

depicts conventional medieval iconography. This makes identifying any possible function or purpose based on symbolic significance highly problematic. Yet, some potential insight into lay reception of creature imagery, as highlighted by this graffito's existence.

The creature measures 21 x 15 cm, making it one of the largest discernible graffiti found here. Set at 65 cm from the floor at its highest point, it is roughly eye-level for an adult, placing it within a clear line of visibility. It was likely drawn by a standing adult (as opposed to sitting or kneeling, which might imply that the graffito was etched under different circumstances, for example, a more specifically devotional activity).<sup>16</sup>

While simplistic in style, the graffito's clear, solid outline is still easily discernible despite some damage; large scratches can be seen across the entire surface of this pier and the others on the tower and within the nave. These may be the result of attempted decoration or restoration work, or may have been deliberate.<sup>17</sup> The location of the inscription, on the southeast tower pier facing west and close to the chancel entrance, is worth noting; the chancel was a highly-sanctified area separated from the crossing (and thus, usually the lay parishioner) by a rood screen. Interestingly, the concentration of discernible graffiti in this area is particularly high.

## Analysis

Establishing the significance of this graffito when the creature is so difficult to identify convincingly is perplexing. Yet it is assumed that there *was* some significance, and that this is not simply an idle sketch created to while away the time, owing to its size, visibility, and location both in a public area and in direct proximity to the most spiritually

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<sup>16</sup> See J. Peake, "Graffiti and Devotion in Three Maritime Churches" in T.A. Heslop, E., Mellings, M. Thofner . (eds.), *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: from Prehistory to the Present*, (Boydell, 2012), pp. 148-162

<sup>17</sup> The idea of graffiti being deliberately damaged invites discussion about how graffiti were perceived by those in positions of authority. There is no evidence to suggest that graffiti writing or drawing were proscribed activities; therefore, other reasons for the purposeful destruction of graffiti images are worth investigating, though outside of the scope of this paper.

potent area of the church. It is tempting, with images involving beasts or animals, to attempt to ascribe symbolic value or interpretation based on what we know of the didactic function of creature imagery in medieval Christianity, though in the case of graffiti this must be done with extreme caution. Certainly, the symbolism of animals and monsters in the Middle Ages was, especially in a religious context, commonplace and important. It has been extensively documented that beasts were adopted and allegorized in order to give religious and moral instruction, and, in some contexts, were employed as moralistic devices to communicate Biblical messages.<sup>18</sup> Therefore some consideration should of course be given to a possible iconographical interpretation. Dragons and serpent-like creatures often represent the devil,<sup>19</sup> while deformed creatures, hybrids, and monsters of all sorts have been called the “products of the terrifyingly promiscuous medieval imagination”<sup>20</sup> and even looking upon such images was potentially “fecund and dangerous.”<sup>21</sup> However, context is key and while many beasts were ascribed specific symbolic meaning, creatures with no clear resemblance to those employed in conventional instructional iconography are found frequently in marginalia, sculpture, architecture and artwork. Thus, while a cockatrice or dragon in a bestiary might well symbolize the devil, a similar monstrous creature etched into the wall by an unskilled hand to form a presumably unsanctioned (though not expressly forbidden) piece of imagery, cannot necessarily be said to serve the same or similar didactic function.

While it is tempting to postulate that representations of creatures in graffiti add another dimension to the use or interpretation of animal iconography within the medieval

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, D. Hassig (ed) *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life and Literature* (Garland Publishing 1999) pp. 51-99

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, the Aberdeen Bestiary MS 24 folios 65 and 66v, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f66v>

<sup>20</sup> M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Reaktion, 1992), p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Camille, p. 90. “As the thirteenth-century Polish scholar Wielto argued, imagination, being an intermediary between mind and matter, allowed demons to couple with human beings since what was perceived in the *phantasia* was, in some cases, real. It was for this reason that pregnant women were urged not to look at monkeys, or even to think of monstrous things, lest their imaginations impregnate their offsprings with hideous forms...”

church, this cannot currently be claimed with any real foundation, though further field work may well continue to shed light on this possibility. Tantalizingly, Pritchard records a pair of graffiti that appear to use animal imagery in some form of moral satire at St Peter's Church, Stetchworth, Cambridgeshire, where a graffito of a woman with an elaborate headdress matched with an image of an owl with a similar elaborate head-dress. Pritchard suggests that this might be "...a satire by one who objected to the extravagant fashion and luxury of the day."<sup>22</sup> Certainly, the iconography of the owl in the medieval bestiary had far-from-pleasant connotations,<sup>23</sup> but more examples of this kind of inscription, which seems to explicitly condemn the woman portrayed with the use of animal imagery, have yet to be found.

In the absence of being able to convincingly determine a function for the inscription in **Figure 1**, the graffiti here might tell us something - albeit on a fairly basic level - about the lay reception of animal and creature imagery, for which there is scant evidence. Simply put, such graffiti suggests that the author had seen this kind of imagery elsewhere, perhaps (though not certainly) in the church itself, and then chose to replicate it in a bold and visible way. This implies a level of understanding and some kind of impact upon the viewer, though whether this was purely aesthetic or had some other symbolic significance is impossible to infer conclusively. This is nonetheless worth noting, as the function and reception of such imagery can normally only be considered from the perspective of those who commissioned it; we can deduce what they intended their audience to see and understand, but the impact on the viewer is a relative unknown.

In terms of **Figure 2**, then, it seems reasonable to ascertain that imagery like this had been seen, understood, and purposefully replicated by the author and that the size of the inscription along with its location might indicate that it was created to be seen by others,

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<sup>22</sup> Pritchard *English Medieval Graffiti* p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> "Bubo inquit, in tenebris peccatorum deditos, et lucem iusticie fugientes significat" / "The owl signifies those who have given themselves up to the darkness of sin and those who flee from the light of righteousness." The Aberdeen Bestiary MS.24 folio 50r, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f50r>

making it an unlikely idle sketch, and this appears to be true for other examples discussed in this study. The pier upon which this is carved houses nineteen of the seventy-three recorded examples in the Church - thirteen of which, like the creature, have a west-facing orientation. All of this indicates some real significance of place, again lending to the suggestion that that graffito was in some way felt to be important by its author. While it is impossible to do more than speculate that **Figure 2** might reflect artwork once present at the site, this might have been the case. Some birdlike creatures can still be seen in what remains of the decorative painting on the rood screen, and dragon carvings are found on the misericords, both located near where the inscription was found. While the graffiti does not resemble either, perhaps imagery such as this, that we can no longer see, might have influenced the author of this graffito. Other graffiti examples that more clearly demonstrate a reflection of surrounding artwork have been found, such as a hell-mouth at St Mary's Church, Troston.<sup>24</sup>

### **Allegory and Morality**

**Figure 3**, though resembling a bas-relief much more than a typical graffito, it is worthy of discussion as something of an anomaly at this site not only for its technique, but because it can be considered as a more-obvious example of "artwork" in graffiti.

### ***Composition and measurements***

**Figure 3** is the largest inscription in the Church, measuring 26 x 25cm. Curiously, it is deeply engraved into the wall rather than having been merely lightly drawn or painted and the execution suggests a skilled hand, one of only a handful of "professional" examples at this site. Its lower position suggests that the engraver was seated or kneeling whilst carving this scene. Combining its quality and its production from this position, it seems reasonable to

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<sup>24</sup> M. Champion, "The Graffiti Inscriptions of St Mary's Church, Troston," *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology*, Vol. 43/2 (2014), pp. 235-258





**Figure 3** Two Figures, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.

infer that the work on this image took some time. Having created the image while kneeling often implies

a devotional motivation, but this is not always so. Still, the iconography of this piece implies that it served a religious function.

This inscription can be found on the south west tower pier – once again in an area of public accessibility, yet close to a restricted and highly sanctified space, this time bordering onto the south transept rather than the chancel. It depicts two figures, a man and a woman, the female figure standing taller, holding a spoon in one hand, and placing the other up to the man's face.

### *Analysis*

**Figure 3** is a possible example of more formally commissioned church decoration; it could have been an accompaniment to or replacement for murals that would typically depicted this moral or allegorical scenes. The carving might reflect artwork that was in the church at the time; yet it is utterly unique in terms of execution and style that it might be argued that this graffito *was* the artwork, though, if this is true it is difficult to understand why it is the only example of its kind at this site.<sup>25</sup> The form, size, quality, and tooling

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<sup>25</sup> Parallels exist at Norwich Castle keep, and the passage leading to Carlisle Castle keep, but interestingly do not yet been found in a Church context.

suggest the work of a professional craftsman, and furthermore – if the interpretation posited in the present study is to be accepted - the content appears to depict a scene that would have been commonplace in religious morality artwork.

In modern-day Leighton Buzzard, it is believed locally that this engraving depicts “Simon and Nelly,” the two parental figures from the traditional Lenten story of how the Simnel cake was first created.<sup>26</sup> While understandable, it is not an entirely feasible interpretation. While the image depicts a man and a woman, with the woman holding a spoon and the man holding a circular object commonly interpreted as a ball of dough, and the woman’s hand on the man’s face is ascribed to Nelly tweaking Simon’s ear in anger as they argued about how to cook their famous cake, it seems most unlikely. The Simnel Cake story does not appear to have any roots in connections to the town or its people and it is difficult to believe that this particular anecdote would have held such great importance that it would comprise the only carving of its type – bold, visible, well-executed – in this church.

Far more likely is that this tableau represents a moral or instructional scene commonly found in church murals, that of an image from the Seven Works of Mercy. “Tending the Sick” or “Feeding the Hungry” might better account for the iconography. The woman holding the spoon doles out food to the figure beneath her, who clutches a round loaf of bread, a bowl, or even a satchel typical of a traveller. Medieval wall paintings across England depict these scenes in very similar ways.<sup>27</sup> Why one particular Work would be chosen above the remaining six for replication in this way is worth questioning; normally, multiple Works are

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<sup>26</sup> T. Warburton has gone into some detail about this story in the published Church guide: “[the graffito] is generally held to represent Simon and Nelly who attempted to make a special dish for the visit home of their children on Mothering Sunday. All they had was a little dough and an old piece of Christmas pudding. They... disagreed as to how it should be cooked.... Nelly grabbed [Simon] by the ear and declared it should be baked.” T. Warburton, *Through Fire and Rebirth: A Visitor’s Guide to All Saints’ Parish Church, Leighton Buzzard* (All Saints’ Parish Church Council, 1992), p.8

<sup>27</sup> Murals at Potter Heigham, Norfolk, and Trotton, West Sussex, are just two examples of many murals that depict “feeding the hungry” and “tending the sick” in very similar ways to **fig. 2**. At Potter Heigham, a woman holding a spoon is shown administering medicine to illustrate “Tending the Sick,” while another scene shows a woman handing a loaf of bread – not dissimilar from the “ball of dough” at Leighton – to a man, depicting “Feeding the Hungry.” These images can be viewed online at <http://www.paintedchurch.org/pottheig.htm>.



found in friezes together, and while of course no wall paintings survive to indicate whether other Works might have been depicted in paint form, this scene does appear to have been singled out for a carved display. A forthcoming study will discuss the possibility of this church's function as a popular pilgrim site; while that particular investigation is beyond the scope of the current paper, it is for now suggested that a parish church which may have been functioning as a popular site for pilgrims and so tried to emulate a larger pilgrimage site such as Lincoln by feeding the hungry pilgrim. The image faces southwards – right into the transept where, as previously noted, this prestigious relic was most likely displayed – and it seems likely that this orientation was purposeful. Regardless of its original function of this church, this work is an example of “artwork” depicting a familiar instructional theme as opposed to the more-usual informal and inherently personal sketches.

### **Tracery designs**

**Figure 4**, which depicts a window tracery design, is also the work of a professional. In contrast, **Figures 5** and **6** appear to illustrate the same tracery, though far more crudely; these may be copies attempted by less skilled hands, or practice versions prior to the final, careful example in **Figure 4**.

### ***Composition and measurements***

All three examples of the graffiti depict a four-light window with geometric tracery, incorporating two quatrefoiled circles and one cinquefoil at the top center. All versions are roughly the same size, 24 x 14 cm, though this is easier to measure accurately in the case of **Figure 4** - which, like the creature graffiti discussed earlier, is placed 165 cm from the floor at its highest point. The window design does not match any of the 15<sup>th</sup> -century Perpendicular windows found in the current church building. Its relatively simple design recalls, instead, an



**Figure 4** Window tracery graffiti, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.

Early English window. Perhaps the graffiti represent the architecture found in the earlier iteration of the church; the repetition of the image and its placement around the church makes this an attractive notion. Still, while there are a multitude of examples of architectural graffiti which directly relate to their surroundings, less than half of the examples of small-scale architectural designs currently recorded can be said to

precisely relate to their surrounding architecture. **Figure 7**, for instance, may illustrate a different window design once found at this site, a wheel-window, for which there is no other evidence to be found in written records nor is there any architectural evidence that it ever existed at All Saints.<sup>28</sup>

### *Analysis*

In the case of **figs, 4, 5 and 6**, it is appealing to speculate that they represent the original 13th-century windows of the church. They are definitely copying something because, though created by different hands, they share the same design and are repeated around the church.

<sup>28</sup> This has been interpreted as a rose or wheel window, but more investigation is required. The twelve sections separated by radiating spokes is also reminiscent of a medieval zodiac design. Champion has suggested that this inscription may depict a carved spandrel. Pers. comm.



**Figures 5 and 6** Window tracery graffiti, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.

Tracery designs appear in other sites across England, but are relatively uncommon in graffiti.<sup>29</sup> Their importance in terms of understanding medieval architectural design processes is invaluable, not least as surviving manuscript evidence is so scant.<sup>30</sup> It seems clear that tracery designs are often evidence of planning and design for eventual scaling up to be finalized, measured, and constructed; the extremely large-scale examples discovered at Binham serve as particularly interesting evidence of this, though many smaller examples have been recorded.<sup>31</sup> It is certain that many, if not most architectural graffiti are functional in nature as an element of the design process in a paper-short world. Numerous unfinished examples visible in multiple English churches would suggest as much; Champion has noted

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, M. Champion, "Architectural Inscriptions: New Discoveries in East Anglia," *Church Archaeology*, Vol. 16 (2012), pp. 65-80.

<sup>30</sup> M. Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voice of England's Churches* (Ebury 2015) p.99

<sup>31</sup> See Champion, "Tracery Designs at Binham Priory;" and Pritchard *English Medieval Graffiti*, pp. 37-42?

that many of the unfinished graffiti are often drawn to show just part of a design, usually the most technically difficult sections.<sup>32</sup> This implies a direct motive of planning and design.

The wheel window at All Saints, if we indeed accept that interpretation of the graffiti,<sup>33</sup> is a little more difficult to rationalize than the other repeated tracery designs when there is no evidence that such a window existed at this site. Like most of the architectural graffiti that we find, then, it should be assumed that this represents a window at another location. Two very famous examples of wheel or rose windows exist at Lincoln Cathedral, but its design bears no resemblance to either. Of course, the graffiti could still be instructional in nature; a master mason showing his apprentices how such windows would be designed and constructed, drawing on external examples (or even creating new designs) to demonstrate the process. One might even speculate that there was a plan to create a rose window at one time, possibly in an attempt to emulate Lincoln; the possession of Hugh of Lincoln's tunic and the prospect of this church's function as a popular pilgrim site with connections to Lincoln perhaps giving cause to such aspirations.<sup>34</sup>

Another function for the window-tracery graffiti is its possible connection with number theory and geometry employed by masons and other artisans used to amplify religious associations.<sup>35</sup> Window tracery designs could reflect the intricacy and symmetry of Creation and, in some contexts, images of windows, like portals, were considered

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<sup>32</sup> Champion, *Medieval Graffiti*, p102

<sup>33</sup> See n. 29.

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note as well at this point that Lincoln had a central spire – a feature that All Saints possessed, which has already been identified as unusual for a parish church – though the spire at Lincoln collapsed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was never rebuilt.

<sup>35</sup> See N. Hiscock, *The Symbol at your Door: Number and Geometry in the Religious Architecture of the Greek and Latin Middle Age*, (Ashgate, 2007) esp. chap. 6, “The Whole Frame of the Universe,” pp. 231-331. Hiscock notes that, in the Middle Ages, reforming abbots and bishops were the “architects of their own building projects” often depicted beside building work giving instructions to builders; these patrons certainly had the means to convey their architectural requirements to builders in a way that could include symbolic content; pp. 48-49.

**Figure 7** Wheel window graffiti, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire. Photo: author.



symbolically resonant in their own right.”<sup>36</sup> While there is no suggestion that architectural graffiti was unequivocally religious or devotional in nature nor that its presence on the church wall was inspired by a purely spiritual motivation, still when considering the significance of location and the fabric upon which these graffiti are inscribed, along with the symbolic significance of certain aspects of the architecture being portrayed, one should not discount symbolic significance too readily. This may help explain the decision to locate the traceries on the southeast and southwest tower piers, owing to the spiritual potency of this area.

## **Personal Markers**

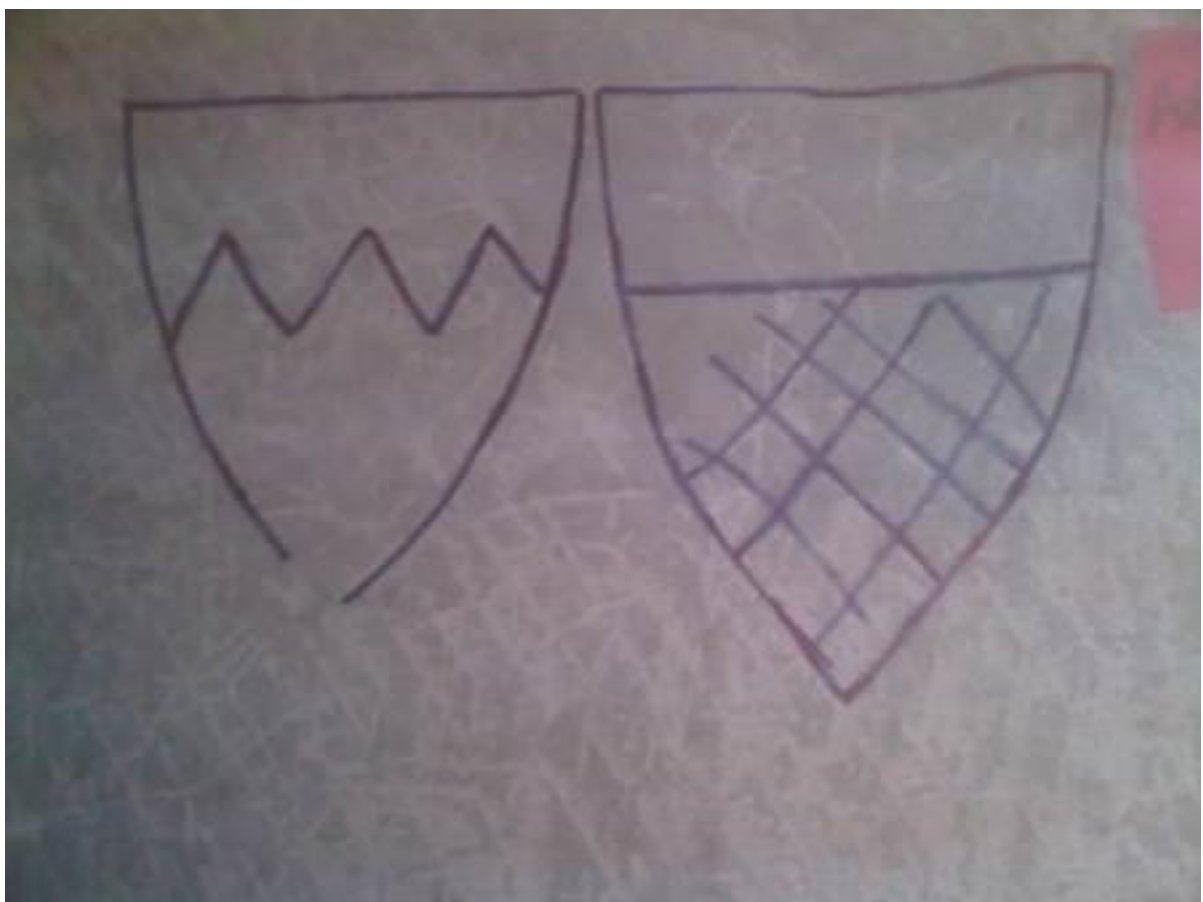
### ***Composition and Measurements***

Moving from general, possible symbolic designs, the church was also adorned with graffiti of a more-personal nature. **Figure 8** depicts basic heraldic two shields which, because of their crude rendition, cannot now be connected to a particular family. Together, the two shields measure 30 x 15 cm, and are level with the composite creature and the widow tracery

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<sup>36</sup> J. Luxford, “Symbolism in East Anglian Flushwork” in J. Cherry and A. Payne (eds.), *Signs and Symbols: Proceedings of the 2006 Harlaxton Symposium: Harlaxton Medieval Studies Vol XVIII* (Shaun Tyas Donington, 2009), p. 123.





**Figure 8** Heraldic shields graffiti, Church of All Saints, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire.  
Photo: author.

on the same pier, once again suggesting that they were created while standing and intended to be easily visible. A figure of a soldier or knight stands next to the shields, but it is unclear whether it relates to the coats of arms because this area has been subject to over-inscribing and graffiti layering over time.

### ***Analysis***

Coats of arms and heraldic imagery are frequently found in graffiti, and – except for textual graffiti where names and/or dates have been inscribed – are the type of graffiti that most strongly indicate a genuine desire to leave a personal marker, and thus to be remembered at a particular site. Graffiti like these may be indicative not only of function of at least a certain type of graffiti, but of activity at the site itself: while primary references to medieval graffiti are scarce, one 15<sup>th</sup>-century reference that discusses graffiti discusses a coat of arms, their function, as well as their likely reception – in this case, in a foreign land. Felix Fabri records in his travel accounts detailing his pilgrimage to Palestine that upon arrival he and his companions were given a list of instructions and rules in order to prevent them from harm “...lest they run into danger through ignorance.”<sup>37</sup> The following item is worth particular note:

...Pilgrims of noble birth must not deface walls by drawing their coats-of-arms thereon, or by writing their names, or by fixing upon the walls papers on which their arms are painted, or by scratching columns and marble slabs, or boring holes in them with iron tools, to make marks of their having visited them; for such conduct gives great offence to the Saracens, and they think those who do so to be fools.<sup>38</sup>

Later he observes that, in spite of this rule,

A pilgrim nobleman, by way of pastime, drew his own coat-of-arms and those of his companions, on the wall, very finely and beautifully, and just as he had finished his work, at which he had wrought for many hours, one of the Saracens ran up with his hands full of filth, bedaubed the picture shamefully, and went away laughing. At this the nobles were exceeding wroth, and cursed that youth, yet no one of them dared to

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<sup>37</sup> A. Stewart (tr); Felix Fabri, *The Book of the Wanderings of Brother Felix Fabri*, (London: Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society 1892) p. 249. See also M. Champion's discussion elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 249-250.

lay hands upon him. If he had done such a thing in our own country, he would have been torn to pieces.<sup>39</sup>

These extracts illustrate that at least one key function of heraldic graffiti, and indeed a variety of other activities that appear to involve making some kind of sign on the fabric of a wall, was to leave one's marker at a site; "...to make marks of their having visited them." This is interesting because, while it might appear obvious that graffiti were created to leave a personal marker, at least from a modern perspective where familiar actions such as name-writing or "tagging" are committed for this very purpose, this cannot be said categorically for medieval graffiti, which is an entirely different phenomenon, occurring within a wildly different social and cultural context, where it was neither proscribed in the way that it is today nor always inherently personal in nature. Fabri's narrative thus offers a rare contemporary account of a certain type of graffiti creation, the purpose behind it, and a reaction to it.

Although reasons of prestige would explain the wish to carve a personal marker at such an important pilgrim site, at a parish church such as the present study concerns, this motivation is less obvious. Again, the question of both the function of this church (and others that contain similar graffiti) as possible pilgrimage sites is raised, and it is noted that other heraldic symbols are found in graffiti within this church. Therefore, understanding the beliefs and behaviours surrounding activity around relics and shrines, it should further be asked whether there might be some devotional or intercessory purpose that is not necessarily linked to the prestige of the site itself, but to the site's possession of a certain icon, altar or relic, and the possibility of saintly intervention via close proximity to these things.

This suggestion reflects common devotional interactive behaviour at shrines where visitors left markers, scraped off fragments of stone bases, tried to obtain as close physical

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 259.



proximity to and even kiss icons and relics, and then obtain souvenirs of their visit.<sup>40</sup> That some graffiti was motivated by similar aspects of this behaviour is also bolstered by the fact that the vast majority of graffiti appear in this particular area of the church,<sup>41</sup> across the south-east and south-west tower piers. This area of the church, not only close to the chancel and high altar, opens directly onto the south transept where it is likely that St Hugh's relic was once housed. The pictorial content of the graffiti in this area, as well as the volume, is telling: of the fifteen heads and faces at this site, thirteen are found in this area. For those without a familial coats of arms, or the literacy capabilities to write their own name, perhaps a self-portrait – or a portrait of the person who needed saintly intervention – was an important way of not only leaving a permanent and personal marker at a site, as indicated by Fabri, but perhaps of ensuring their recognisability to the saints from whom they sought assistance. It follows, after all, that the majority of graffiti, most of which appear personal in nature, are found surrounding the area where the tunic of St. Hugh was probably situated, and makes sense to assume that the reason for creating inscriptions in proximity to this relic was primarily intercessory or devotional. A small inscription of what appears to be a hand on the south-east tower pier echoes the exvoto models of afflicted body parts that would often be left at a shrine,<sup>42</sup> and as well as the heads and faces that have been noted, there are heraldic symbols and imagery (4), and human figures (4) – suggesting again that most of these are of a personal nature, insofar as they represent – or are intended to represent – a particular person or family, suggesting a real desire to be remembered at that site.

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<sup>40</sup> Discussed at length in numerous studies; see especially B. Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Boydell and Brewer, 1998) and P. Geary *Furta Sacra: Theft of Relics and Living with the Dead* (Princeton, 1975).

<sup>41</sup> More broadly, examples of graffiti are found in abundance at other sacred sites. St Alban's Cathedral is famed for its astounding wealth of medieval graffiti, and an initial investigation of Canterbury Cathedral, too, reveals a great number of etchings, though not comparable with St Alban's. King Edward's Chair, a popular pilgrim destination, is itself completely covered in graffiti. These examples may equally well link to conceptions of prestige, being prominent pilgrimage destinations.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, B. Nilson *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England*, pp. 100-101; see also J. Peake, "Graffiti and Devotion in Three Maritime Churches" in T.A. Heslop, E. Mellings, and M. Thofner, (eds.), *Art, Faith and Place in East Anglia: from Prehistory to the Present* (Boydell, 2012 pp.148-162

It is already clear that votive offerings left next to a shrine were designed to be specific to the person or request. Models of body parts specific to the illness or affliction were often donated, and even in some cases offerings that represented their donor in some other physical way were left, such as wax candles that had been measured out to specifically weigh the same as the person seeking aid.<sup>43</sup> The nature of votive offerings as being representative of and personal to their donor was imperative, and their physical closeness to the saint from whom assistance was sought is key; thus some of the more personal graffiti in this area along with the higher volume in these places, might be better understood.

Indeed, when considering these possible functions, it is worth noting that there are elsewhere examples of textual graffiti that support this theory, and where the text appears to articulate specific requests, it is possible to ascribe an intercessory function. For instance, Veronique Plesch discusses numerous textual graffiti etched directly across imagery of St. Sebastian which appear to be pleas for help, deliberately carved onto the paintings of the saint himself, presumably for reasons of absolute proximity to, even physical interaction with, his holy image.<sup>44</sup> The perception of relics and images as being imbued with sacred power requires little discussion or debate; much work has discussed how relics were not only sacred objects in their own right, but were regarded as real sources of divine power.<sup>45</sup> That the saint was physically present wherever his or her relics lay was essential to the beliefs surrounding their veneration, and this understanding in turn is equally essential to the present study. The power of a relic lay in the belief that its appurtenant saint still inhabited that space; if a person could therefore gain access to this space, then they were fundamentally gaining access to this saint, who could intercede with God on their behalf.

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<sup>43</sup> Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* p. 53.

<sup>44</sup> V. Plesch, "Memory on the Wall: Graffiti on Religious Wall Paintings," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32/ 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 167-197.

<sup>45</sup> S. Barton, "Patrons, Pilgrims and the Cult of Saints" in J. Stopford (ed.), *Pilgrimage Explored* (York Medieval Press, 1999), p. 57.

Obviously, some graffiti, especially those found around shrines and altars, must have been votive or intercessory in nature. This might add a new dimension to the way shrine behaviour and veneration is understood. It can provide an additional source base by which to understand this phenomenon, especially from a popular perspective. Many of the poorest people might not have been able to afford a votive model or a wax offering; perhaps, then, this was their alternative, though of course there is no reason to suppose that graffiti did not function this way in their own right – as an additional activity, a common devotional practice, and not necessarily a substitute. To this end, it is worth pointing out that graffiti provide a more permanent offering; in which case, it might be suggested that graffiti inscriptions were regarded as even more potent than the votive objects left behind at a shrine. More field work will need to be done in order to identify similar patterns at other locations.

## **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to give a general overview, with focus on select examples, of the broad range of extant graffiti at All Saints' Church, Leighton Buzzard, and offered some initial thoughts about interpretation and purpose. It has shown that there are numerous types or categories of graffiti, even within a single site, that each appear to have their own function or meaning, and suggested that the repetition of such imagery along with the frequency of graffiti in general indicate that this was a common and understood practice. This article has also aimed to demonstrate some ways in which this graffiti might be approached for close study – utilizing knowledge of iconography, architecture, devotion and belief, and taking into account factors such as position, location, volume, and distribution, as well as authorship where possible. Analyses have been necessarily brief, in places speculative, articulating possibilities while emphasizing the need for further study in order to help establish firmer conclusions. The challenges in examining such crude and simple imagery

have been noted; however, the potential for graffiti's capability to shed new light on a variety of aspects of church life – religious, devotional, architectural – has been demonstrated. The need for further graffiti research is necessary. Indeed, the concept of graffiti as an indicator of not only activity in a parish church, but as pilgrim or shrine activity, shows promise and a forthcoming paper will investigate this in more detail. It is hoped that, with continued surveys of medieval buildings involving the recording of individual samples at each site, conclusions can become increasingly confident and the value of this source base fully recognized. At present, even after half a decade of fieldwork that has already gained a great deal of momentum, graffiti research is in its infancy and much remains to be discovered. There can be no denying that in the study of medieval history -- where sources are relatively rare and greatly limited -- such a vast amount of material, much of which was created by those whose voices are heard so rarely, is deserving of continued, serious research and investigation. 🐼